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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 000867

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: IRAQI GOVERNMENT FORMATION: WHO'S IN CHARGE HERE ?

REF: A. BAGHDAD 822  
[B. BAGHDAD 629](#)  
[C. BAGHDAD 653](#)  
[D. BASRAH 029](#)  
[E. BAGHDAD 610](#)  
[F. HILLAH 030](#)  
[G. BAGHDAD 534](#)  
[H. BAGHDAD 682](#)  
[I. BAGHDAD 620](#)

Classified By: Classified by: Political Counselor Robert S. Ford  
for Reasons 1.4 (D)

[1](#). (C) Summary: As we watch the political machinations unfolding over national government formation, it seems increasingly clear that there is not one party able to drive the process by itself, particularly in regards to selecting the next Prime Minister. The Shia Coalition, with its 128 seats in the new Council of Representatives (COR), has claimed the right to nominate the Prime Minister. Its outward facade of strength, however, has been undermined by internal disputes over who would be the nominee of a progressively more fractured Shia Coalition. Within the landscape of the Shia political and religious leadership, only two figures emerge who have a limited ability to influence, in very different ways, the face of the new government: radical Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, and Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. End Summary.

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Rebel With a Cause  
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[2](#). (C) In the past year, we have seen the one-time fugitive from the law Muqtada al-Sadr transition into a power broker whose recent political successes have won him grudging respect from the other Shia leaders. Sadr's votes made up half of Prime Minister Ibrahim Ja'afari's vote totals to win the premiership. If Sadr's deputies had voted for someone else, Ja'afari would be out of power. Many Iraqi political contacts, Kurds, Shia and Sunni Arabs, think that Sadr will be the real political power behind a Ja'afari government. Ja'afari's Dawa Party did poorly in the January 2005 contests against SCIRI at the provincial level; Dawa is perceived as a weaker brother within the Shia Coalition. Only by joining with the Sadrist has Ja'afari been able to hold a (narrow) advantage within the Coalition.

[3](#). (C) Sadr's strength, in turn, lies in his willingness and capability to mobilize support for his candidates. In a recent appearance in Basrah, over ten thousand people reportedly flocked to see Sadr for a 15-minute speech, which was immediately broadcast by

state-owned Al-Iraqiya television (see reftel D). However, some politicians within the Shia Coalition regret that the Coalition's leadership (headed by SCIRI leader Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim) ever agreed to giving the Sadrists 30 seats within the Coalition as the price for Sadr joining the Coalition. Pointing to the Sadrist Risaliyun party's capturing only two seats in the December 2005 election, they say that Sadr bid very high for his support and the Coalition's leadership paid an exorbitant price that is at the root of the Coalition's prime minister candidate problems now.

¶4. (C) While Sadr appears strong now - at least, until someone stronger calls him on his bluff - even he cannot deliver the premiership to Ja'afari. As the political opposition to Ja'afari increases, Sadr is finding himself unable to ensure his political ally prevails against strong opposition. In a sense, Muqtada's strength and influence is at its peak now with Ja'afari clinging on due to Sadr's help. With another prime minister less dependent on him, Sadr could see his wings - or those of his militia - clipped.

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The Quiet Iraqi  
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¶5. (C) In contrast to the brash Sadr, Ayatollah Sustains influence is subtle, more notable in its absence than in any active or overt expression of support. All the main Shia candidates have made pilgrimages to Najaf to meet with the Najaf marja'ia,

BAGHDAD 00000867 002 OF 003

led by Sistani, before and during the government formation process. These politicians seek to appear pious and to get support on the prime minister battle (see reftel E). Sistani's office has repeatedly told visitors, however, that the marja'ia will not pick a candidate and has no intention to interfere in Iraq's political scene. For example, Shia independent and longtime Embassy interlocutor Qasim Daoud told PolCouns March 7 that Sistani is "neutral" about the candidates in the Shia Prime Minister race. Sistani and the Najaf clerics instead are focused on maintaining Shia political unity, and in particular the unity of the Shia Coalition. We see no indication that Sistani particularly likes Ja'afari per se. The marja'ia's insistence on Shia political unity has helped Ja'afari, however. He has been able to insist that he is the Coalition's nominee and the other Coalition members have been reluctant to break ranks.

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SCIRI On the Outs  
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¶6. (C) Sistani's refusal to take a clear stance has effectively hobbled Sadr rival and SCIRI leader Hakim. Hakim failed to line up the votes within the Shia Coalition to get his candidate, Adil Abd al-Mahdi, the premiership - a serious misstep on his part. This failure has fueled his fear of rival Sadr, whom he sees as Iran's new partner in Iraq (see reftel G). Sistani's insistence on Shia unity has compelled Hakim to tread very carefully on talks with the Kurds, Tawafuq, and Allawi about a new national political front. We can expect some interesting SCIRI political contortions if Hakim publicly breaks ranks with the Shia Coalition over the prime minister issue.

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Tehran Also Stuck in Neutral  
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¶7. (C) While it appears that Tehran still wields considerable influence behind the scenes, many of our Iraqi interlocutors have remarked that the Iranians' willingness to meet with a variety of Iraqi leaders indicates weakness, not control. Kurdish Planning Minister Barham Saleh told Charge on March 4 that the Iranians seemed to understand that they are not fully in charge of the Prime Minister race (see reftel H). Saleh stated that Tehran appears to be backing several horses ? Sadr, SCIRI, and Ja'afari. This is reminiscent of the tactics Iran uses in Kurdistan too, he wryly noted. However, even Tehran is making no headway in getting Tawafuq, Allawi, or the Kurds to agree to their chosen candidate, Ja'afari. Presidency Council Chief of Staff Kamran Karadaghi said on March 16 that Tehran has alienated SCIRI and Hakim by openly endorsing Sadr. According to Karadaghi, the Iranians appear progressively weaker each time they press the Kurds for a meeting. Iran lacks the power and the votes to push his through, especially if the U.S. continues to push on the Kurds and Sunni Arabs for a national unity front.

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Kurds Slipping Away ?  
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¶8. (C) Finally, the Kurds are also stuck between seeking to maintain their fragile coalition between the two main Kurdish parties (the PUK and KDP), and trying to find a candidate they can agree to endorse. While they all agree that Ja'afari is a non-starter, there has not yet been a consensus on either Abd al-Mahdi or any of the other names. For the Kurds, however, the most pressing question is not who they will ultimately support for Prime Minister, but how long they will continue to engage. Karadaghi told PolOffs that both President Talabani and KDP leader Masud Barzani were under increasing pressure from their constituency to return to Kurdistan and take care of matters there (see reftel I). On March 6, Barzani informed the DCM that the Samarra aftermath "is a Shia-Sunni Arab conflict of which the Kurds have no part." Given this attitude, and the Kurds' longstanding desire for autonomy - if not full independence - from Baghdad, many of our contacts wonder how long the Kurds will remain engaged seriously in the national government's formation. American leverage with the Kurds will be especially important in this regard.

BAGHDAD 00000867 003 OF 003

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Comment  
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¶9. (C) After the first session of the Council of Representatives on March 16, Karadaghi confirmed to PolOff that no one - not the Shia, Sunni Arabs, Kurds, or Iran - has enough clout to force the others to accept its candidate. Shia, Sunni Arab, and Kurdish political contacts told PolOffs on March 16 that they were all waiting for "someone" to make the first move. Despite President Talabani's optimism that the government will be formed by the end of March 2005, many fear that Iraqi society will fragment into a broader sectarian conflict well before the new government is functioning, especially if Zarqawi scores a major terror success against the Shia.

¶10. (C) In addition, Sistani may be more of a hindrance than a help in the current political stalemate. Although all the political figures mentioned above have their limitations, only Sistani

has failed to use the influence at his disposal. While appreciating his ethical scruples, Sistani's half in, half out approach has only succeeded muting the conflict within the Shia, not settling it. His insistence on Shia unity, no matter the cost, might ultimately end in a politically fragmented Shia society filled with resentment at its inability to take advantage of its power.

KHALILZAD